SUNDAY WITH LAURA KUENSSBERG, 4TH FEBRUARY 2024

PETER KYLE
Shadow Secretary of State for Science, Innovation & Technology

LK: Let’s speak to Peter Kyle, who is Labour’s Shadow Technology Secretary. He’s in Washington now and is meeting tech companies this week. Thanks for joining us, it must be very early in the morning. We are discussing all of these difficult issues this morning. Is a ban on social media for under-16s, something that Labour might consider?

PK: I’m open minded about how we go forward about this and I’m already in discussion with bereaved families who have lost children to the impact that social media or that social media has had an aggregating factor in the loss of life and the harm that is done to them. But what we need to do is, we’ve got to make sure that all the powers that already exist are in place as quickly as possible. The instructions that are going to come out of OFCOM as a result of the Online Safety Act, aren’t going to go live until the end of this year. It’s taken five years for this bill to get on to statute. It took far too long. It was paused over the last leadership election for the Conservatives and Kemi Badenoch calling it, legislating for hurt feelings. So, we really need to get a grip on the challenge we have right here.

I’m open minded about how we go forward. There are other things we could do quite quickly. For example, the Secretary of State for Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, by this legislation can issue a strategic statement to OFCOM, which forces it to prioritise looking at certain issues, and I think the role of the dark web, the pathway in particular that people take from social media into the dark web, is something OFCOM should be looking at. I’m engaging with bereaved families to see whether this is something, a tool that could be used and I’m open minded as to
using it should Labour take office this year, very soon into a Labour government.

LK: But is that something you believe now, the Technology Secretary, your opposite number Michelle Donelan should do? Should she now use that power to get OFCOM to look at how you can access the dark web from social media apps? Should that happen now? Why wait?

PK: Well, all I can do is prepare a programme of government, because we’re in an election year, and that’s what I’m preparing for and I’ve already been engaging with bereaved families about this as to what powers can be used quickly to protect young people from the what happens on the dark web, the darker side of it, but also Laura, let me just say this. It took five years to get the Online Safety Act into statute. Legislators, regulators but also social media companies were far too late for this, but there are other things coming down the line. The reason that I’m here in Washington is because AI chatbots but also deep fakes, they’re on the horizon in the power and the influence these are going to have over society, over vulnerable people but also particularly on young people. We need to start getting ahead of the curve on this.

So, in part of preparing a programme of government to put to the electorate at the next election, I’m looking very carefully at how we can get ahead of the curve, so that when these things wash over our society, we are prepared, we have the regulation, the legislation and the relationship with the tech companies, so that we can - and also our international partners, so that we can work together to make sure that the harm that could come from it, is mitigated before the harm actually starts to have an impact.

LK: But in terms of what we know happens right now, when the online laws were going through parliament, Labour said that there was an important provision that the government took out that
should go back in. So, Labour said at that point, that legal but harmful content online for adults should also be outlawed. Do you still believe that and would you still look at that if you win the next election?

PK: I’m already looking at that intensively, understanding how harmful but legal content, the impact it has. I’m not sure it needs to be brought into the same scope as other parts but also Laura, there is a piece of legislation going through the House of Lords at the moment and the government have introduced a legislation which just weeks, I mean weeks after the Online Harm Act went live, they’re watering down one key part of it which is the power that coroners have to demand and sanction – or demand information from tech companies and the tech companies can’t resist releasing that information to the coroner. An amendment has just gone down from the government to remove and water down that right. We are resisting it and we must resist all attempts to water down the powers coroners, OFCOM and other statutory bodies and investigatory bodies have, to hold tech companies to account so they can release information about the impact it’s having on young people.

LK: We understand actually that coroners will get that power to force companies to release information after campaigning from the bereaved families, but I just wonder, this week, dramatically, where you are in Washington, Mark Zuckerberg was accused of having blood on his hands. Do you agree with that?

PK: I think that tech companies bear a lot of the responsibility. I think legislators and regulators were also behind the curve. But I think the primary blame does rest with the people developing this technology, because they knew before anyone else the impact that it could have. They saw the coding, they designed the algorithms. Don’t forget, what we learnt from Brianna’s case in the last few weeks is that the two youngsters that killed her, were interacting
online, and expressing some violent thoughts online, on social media. Now, what the algorithms do is match people with similar concerns, similar language together. The algorithm brings people together who share those certain values. So, it’s clear that social media is bringing together people with harmful values, potentially on a journey towards a criminal activity and they might well have known this well ahead of time.

We need to make sure that where there is the potential for harm, tech companies are throwing open the doors so we can have transparency. We can work together to mitigate these harms before they wash over society, which is what is happening at the moment. And we see something similar, the potential at the moment, with the way that AI is going in some of its real frontier technology that’s emerging. That is why we will move from a voluntary code to a statutory code, so that those companies engaging in that kind of research and development have to release all the test data and tell us what they are testing for so we can see exactly what is happening and where this technology is taking us.

LK: Just to be really clear on what that actually means if people aren’t familiar with a lot of the jargon around this debate, you’re saying that you would, if you were in government, if you were lucky enough to win the election, you would force companies working particularly in artificial intelligence to publish their data, to publish what they’re doing in their hard drives, what they’re doing in the back end of their systems?

PK: Indeed. We would compel by law, those test data results to be released to government so that the AI safety institute, set up by Rishi Sunak can scrutinise, can look at exactly what the implications are and just reassure the public that independently, we are scrutinising what is happening in some of the real cutting-edge parts of the technology development, when it comes to artificial intelligence, because don’t forget, some of this technology is going
to have a profound impact on our workplace, on society, on our culture and we need to make sure that development is done safely and where there are implications that government is there and the regulators are there to make sure we are guiding them.

We don’t want to stop this development, and if there is stuff happening that is morally and ethically challenging, I would rather it was done in a country like Britain with a Labour government, so that we can have oversight, it is enhancing of our democratic values as a country and not damaging to it as it could be if it is done elsewhere. So, we have to have these relationships. We’ve got to be honest about where legislation can make a difference, but we also have to work with countries like America and the administration here, so that we can have a regulatory environment which crosses all international boundaries, not just trying to pretend we can solve this problem alone back home.

LK: Peter Kyle, thank you so much for joining us from Washington where I think it is extremely early in the morning, so we’re grateful to you for staying up and being short of sleep. I hope you’ve got some coffee there, thank you very much indeed for joining us from Washington.

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